

**The Old Testament in the Public Square:  
The Biblical Flood Account in Light of  
Archeology, Geology and ANE Flood Traditions**

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A Paper  
Presented to  
Dr. Johnston  
Dallas Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Course  
OT103A: Hebrew Exegesis and OTI I

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July 2015  
File #783



## **Noah's Flood: Fact of Fiction?**

Many Christians are taught as children that the flood in Genesis 6-9 covered the entire earth, including every high mountain, that it destroyed all terrestrial animal life except for those on the ark, and that all modern animal life is descended from them. This story sounds feasible enough until one goes off to college. However once there, one is often ridiculed for believing such “myths.” You are told that the Bible is filled with archeological and geological inaccuracies which prove that it is a man-made fable. Further, you learn that there are many other flood myths which pre-date the Bible, some of which the biblical authors copied from.

All of this compounds to shake our faith in the Bible. Is it true at all? And what of the fact that Jesus and the apostles believed the flood account?<sup>1</sup> Can Jesus be trusted? These are serious questions with dire consequences. In this paper we will examine what the Genesis account of the flood actually says in the original Hebrew, and what it does not say, and compare this with what archeological evidence, geological evidence, and ANE flood accounts actually point to, and what they do not point to.

### **What the Bible DOES, and does NOT say**

Many modern critics point out that there is no evidence for a world-wide flood. In fact, there is much evidence against it. They note that there is not nearly enough water on earth, in it's reservoirs and in it's atmosphere combined, to even begin to cover all the mountains on earth even if the mountains were much shorter.<sup>2</sup> They note that the ark as described is not nearly big enough to carry all the land animals and birds that inhabit the earth, even in their unspciated forms. They note that a world covered in water would create monstrous waves which would

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick A. Filby, *The Flood Reconsidered*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Ross, *Navigating Genesis: A Scientist's Journey Through Genesis 1-11*, (Covina, CA: Reasons to Believe Press, 2014), 152.

pulverize a wooden ark, no matter what type of wood it was made of. Also they ask why has the ark never been found?

How do we answer such protests? Are scientists just a bunch of godless heathen trying to destroy the Bible?<sup>3</sup> After examining the evidence we can conclude that most of them are not. To reconcile the data let's first rule out explanations which hold no water. We cannot say that the marine fossils found atop Everest and some other mountains are evidence for a global flood for vast areas of land do not have any marine fossils or sedimentary layers.<sup>4</sup> The fossils found atop Everest is clear evidence of plate tectonics, not a flood.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the fossils, limestone and fossil-fuel deposits found in North America are far too vast to be created in just one year of flooding.<sup>6</sup> Also, extremely aggressive plate tectonics during, and following the flood cannot be used to explain away mountain heights, nor can a rapidly accelerated radiometric decay rate or a change in the speed of light.<sup>7</sup> The evidence shows that since creation, these factors have remained constant. In fact these factors must remain constant for life on earth to survive.<sup>8</sup> Also, core samples from glaciers prove that there was not a worldwide flood.<sup>9</sup>

So how do we reconcile this evidence with what the Bible says? Does the Bible teach that the water covered the whole earth to the highest mountains? The language of Genesis 6-9 as

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred M. Rehwinkel, *The Flood in the Light of The Bible, Geology, and Archeology*, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 127. See also Donald W. Patton, *The Biblical Flood and the Ice Epoch*, (Seattle: Pacific Meridian Publishing, 1966), 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Ross, 157.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *The Historical Atlas of the Earth: A Visual Exploration of Earth's Physical Past*, eds. Roger Osborne and Donald Tarling (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), 130-131. Even though Gould was an avowed atheist, the science he presents here is very solid.

<sup>6</sup> Ross, 159.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 160.

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004), 163-167.

<sup>9</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 163.

read in English certainly sounds that way: “And God said to Noah... I will destroy them [mankind] with the earth” (Gen. 6:13); “For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die” (6:17); “And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you” (6:19a-b); “For in seven days I will rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground” (7:4); “And the waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered” (7:19); “The waters prevailed above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits [22.5 feet, at least] deep” (7:20); “And all flesh died that moved on the earth...Everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. He blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground...They were blotted out from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those who were with him in the ark” (7:21a, 22-23a, 23c-d); “At the end of 150 days the waters had abated, and... the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. And... in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains were seen” (8:3b, 4b, 5b). “At the end of forty days Noah opened the window of the ark that he had made and sent forth a raven. It went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth.” (8:6-9b); “Neither will I [God] ever again strike down every living creature as I have done” (8:21d); “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (9:11); “And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (9:15b). How can these passages be understood except as referring to the entire planet?

Part of the problem rests in our modern understanding. During the last century or two, nearly everyone on Earth has begun to think globally.<sup>10</sup> This is especially true in first world countries such as the United States. With enough money, we can visit any part of the planet within a day or two. Even if we do not leave our homes, we can see what's going on pretty much anywhere on the globe with just a few clicks of the keyboard. With increased technology we are becoming increasingly interconnected with other nations. This global perspective naturally colors our interpretation of the Bible.

However, earlier generations did not have this global view.<sup>11</sup> This can be plainly seen by examining seven other “worldwide” events mentioned in the Bible.<sup>12</sup> The first is the famine during Joseph's reign in Egypt. In Genesis 41:57 it states “Moreover, all the earth came to Egypt to Joseph to buy grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth.” The NIV states “because the famine was severe in all the world” (41:57b). Obviously the famine did not spread over the entire world and people from every continent did not come to Egypt to buy grain. The text is talking about Joseph's world: the Egyptian empire and possibly the adjacent countries.

Second, in Deuteronomy 2:25 Moses quotes God as saying “This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you on the peoples who are under the whole heaven, who shall hear the report of you and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you.” However, this is referring to the Canaanites who had heard of God's miraculous care for the Israelites.

Third, 1 Kings 4:34 states “And people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.” 1 Kings 10:24 and 2 Chronicles 9:23 say similar things. Obviously this does not include every person or every king

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<sup>10</sup> Ross, *Navigating* 145.

<sup>11</sup> Filby, 81-85.

<sup>12</sup> Ross, 146; Filby, 83.

on earth, but rather King Solomon's world. For the visit from the Queen of Sheba (located in either present day Yemen or Ethiopia) recorded in 2 Chronicles 9 and 1 Kings 10 is most likely listed as an example of how far people would come to see Solomon. That was quite far away by ancient standards, but not the other side of the world, or even the furthest nation away at that time.

This use of global terminology continues in the New Testament. In Luke 2:1 Caesar Augustus declares that "all the world should be registered." Clearly this refers to the Roman Empire. In Acts 2:5 Luke also declares "Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven." Again, this can not be taken to mean every nation on the globe at the time. Genetic studies have shown that people from the New World or Polynesia could not have been included in this group.<sup>13</sup> The next world-wide statement comes from Romans 1:8 where Paul thanks God for the Roman Christians because their "faith is proclaimed in all the world." Again, this must refer to the Roman empire: the world for Paul and his readers. The last such worldwide claim made in the Bible which we will look at is found in Colossians 1:6. There, Paul states that "in the whole world it [the gospel] is bearing fruit and growing...". Again, this refers to the world of Paul and the Colossians: the Roman world. There are more examples in scripture but this short survey should demonstrate that such global language used in the Bible does not refer to the entire globe, but rather to the world of the author or to the characters the author is writing about.<sup>14</sup>

So why would God send a local flood if he wanted to destroy all of evil humanity? The answer is that mankind was evil and had disobeyed God's commanded to disperse, given in

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<sup>13</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 146.

<sup>14</sup> Filby, 83.

Genesis 1:28.<sup>15</sup> The same thing happened again immediately after the flood at the Tower of Babel (Ge. 11). Clues that humanity did not spread out before the flood can be seen in place names listed in Genesis 1-9. There, all the locations listed are in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf Oasis. From Genesis 10 onward the text mentions places found throughout much of the eastern hemisphere.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the flood only needed to be as extensive as the area in which humanity had settled at that time. Now, let's look at the words used in the Hebrew which can cause confusion when translated into English.

In Biblical Hebrew, the word translated mountain is הַר (*har*). *Har* can mean “hill country,” “mountain,” “mount,” “mountain of a god” or “a place of illicit worship.”<sup>17</sup> The description that all the “high hills under the whole heaven” were covered means that from Noah’s perspective looking out from the ark, everything was covered with water across the whole horizon. Also, when the text states in 8:4 that the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat, it could also include the foothills of that range. Older translation stated that the ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. Mount Ararat’s elevation is 16,945 feet. So it’s no wonder some English speakers thought the flood covered the whole earth! However, the Hebrew has the plural “mountains of Ararat,” meaning the range. The Ararat Range is a complex of ranges which cover over 100,000 square miles, with elevations ranging from the thousands of feet, down to the hundreds of feet. Most likely the ark came to rest in the hills of the Ararat range in northern Iraq. Likewise, when Noah released the dove the second time, it brought back an olive branch. Olive trees do not grow on high mountains, especially when under at least 22 feet of water for an extended period. This is another indicator that the flood was local.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rehwinkel, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 149.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, Johann Jakob Stamm, eds., *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2011), 254.

<sup>18</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 152.



Other Hebrew words which have caused a lot of confusion over the years are the words עֶרֶץ (*erets*) and אֲדָמָה (*adamah*). These words are often translated as “earth” or “world” in English. And certainly they sometimes mean that. However, *erets* is the fourth most commonly used noun in the OT. It can mean “ground,” “earth,” “piece of ground,” “territory,” “country,” “region,” “district,” “the whole earth,” “the whole world,” and “the underworld.”<sup>19</sup> Sometimes it means the entire planet, but far more often it refers to a section of land.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the instances that Moses used this word in the flood account, he was most likely referring to all the land that Noah could see, or all the country that humanity inhabited.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise *Adamah* can mean “earth,” “arable ground,” “land owned,” “homeland,” “holy ground,” “holy property,” “estates,” “foreign territories,” “agriculture,” “the underworld,” and “dust.”<sup>22</sup> This word is not required to mean the entire globe either. Most likely, in this context, it refers to all the land settled by humanity thus far. Likewise, all the animals of the land would have died as well, all those except the ones Noah brought aboard the ark. Thus, the flood was cataclysmic and universal in scope in that it destroyed all of humanity except Noah and his family (2 Peter 2:5). But it did not cover the entire globe.

In response to the question of why the Ark has never been found, there is an easy explanation. The eight people who came out of the ark stepped out into a landscaped devastated by the flood. They needed wood for their homes. Most likely they, and subsequent generations, used the readily available, pre-cut wood from the ark for their buildings, especially if it was sitting on a hill, and not high in the mountains. If the flood was local it would also solve the problem of there not being enough room for the animals. The animals Noah loaded up would be the domesticated animals needed once they left the ark, plus the local animals needed to quickly replenish the devastated ecosystem of Mesopotamia. A local flood also explains how a wooden

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<sup>19</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 153; Koehler, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Filby, 82; Arthur C. Custance, *The Extent of the Flood*, (Ottawa: Doorway Papers, 1958), 3.

<sup>21</sup> Filby, 82-83.

<sup>22</sup> Koehler, 15; Custance, 3.

ark could survive the flood. Rather than having monstrous waves from a planet-wide sea, Noah's ark would only have to survive the much lower waves of the flooded Mesopotamian plain.

Another archeological objection that some critics might point to is that up until the late 19th century, no person or nation had ever built such a huge ship.<sup>23</sup> At that time, the largest commercial wooden ships were the mid-nineteenth century clipper vessels, usually built from oak, which were a little over three hundred feet long. However, even at that time, the shipbuilders realized that their oak ships had some tensile strength limits, so they switched to steel boats. To answer this object we again need to look to the details of the story. Noah's ark was not built for sailing quickly across vast oceans. Rather, it simply had to float on flooded plains. Second, Noah faced none of the economic pressures constraining nineteenth-century shipbuilders. Their goal was to transport as much cargo over large seas for as little money as possible. They did not push their oak ship designs very far.<sup>24</sup> According to the Bible, Noah built the ark using Gopher wood. Scholars do not know what wood this is.<sup>25</sup> Also, they do not know all the different types of trees which grew in the Persian Gulf Oasis and Mesopotamia at the time of Noah. However, there are known woods which are much stronger than oak, such as walnut. Also, some tropical timbers are denser than water with tensile strengths matching that of some metals. Before the expansion of Mesopotamian civilizations and their building projects, these trees were probably much more abundant for Noah to use. Besides using his sons, Noah may have also hired others to help him build the ark, even if they did not board with him in the end. Plus, the Bible records that Noah had 120 years to build the ark. Thus, he had much time to plan, and construct it to perfectly suite his needs.

At this point a critic might well ask: "If the flood was local, then why didn't God just tell Noah and his family to move? Why did he have him go to the trouble of building an ark for over a hundred years?" In addition to wanting to save the Mesopotamian ecosystem as mentioned

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<sup>23</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 174.

<sup>24</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 175.

<sup>25</sup> Rehwinkel, 58.

above, there is second reason: God is merciful.<sup>26</sup> When God pours out judgement for sins, he sends a prophet to warn those of impending judgement, and he calls them to repentance. Building a giant boat in the middle of the desert for a 120 years would have given Noah a dramatic attention-getter, and caused people to come out, simply out of curiosity, to hear him. As Peter says in 2 Peter 2:5 Noah was “a herald of righteousness.” Just as God does not remove us Christians from the earth immediately after we are saved, but rather He has us warn those around us of the coming judgement, so God did with Noah.

### **Noah’s Flood in Light of Other Flood Accounts**

We will now look at the Biblical flood account compared to other flood accounts. Many skeptics say that the Bible’s account of a flood is just one of many, and therefore cannot be trusted. Also, many claim that since some of the accounts predate the biblical account, the Bible must have copied from them. However, rather than cast doubt on the validity of the flood story, the more than 200 distinct flood myths from varied cultures from all over the world is strong evidence that there really was a cataclysmic flood that affected all of humanity.<sup>27</sup> Since the story is found all over the world, it must have occurred before humanity spread out, thus making it very early in human history.<sup>28</sup> The majority of these flood accounts mention a large vessel that saved the human race from extinction.<sup>29</sup> The majority also mention the vessel coming to rest on a mountain of local importance to that particular culture. This is evidence of the truthfulness of the Biblical account since it mentions the ark coming to rest in a mount hundred of miles away from the promised land.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 175; Custance, 17-19.

<sup>27</sup> Rehwinkel, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Custance, 15; Filby, 37-38.

<sup>29</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 180.

<sup>30</sup> Custance, 13.

With the deluge stories we see a trend. Typically, the greater the distance, in both time and geography, from Mesopotamia, the greater the distortion of the myth from both the biblical account and from the laws of physics.<sup>31</sup> The story closest to the biblical account is the Babylonian legend found in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The tale of Gilgamesh was found in Assyrian chronicles and seems to be a reworked version from the older Atrahasis Epic of Old Babylon which seems to come from the even older Sumerian Ziusudra tale. These accounts describe the building of a large multi-decked ship sealed with pitch or tar.<sup>32</sup> Like Noah, Utnapishtim of the Gilgamesh Epic (Ziusudra of the Sumerian tale) boards the ship with his whole family. In this record, the flood destroys all humanity except for those aboard his ship. Also like the Genesis account, most of the flood waters come from torrential rainfall.<sup>33</sup> Noah is the tenth patriarch listed in the Bible, and Utnapishtim is listed as the tenth pre-diluvian king of Babylonia. In the Babylonian and Sumerian accounts he is described as being pious, just as Noah is listed as being righteous. Also, both the Mesopotamian and Biblical accounts report that the animals which the flood hero saves are brought to him by divine intervention. In addition, both accounts state that the flood hero release various birds at different times from a window in the boat to see if the flood has subsided. In both accounts the ark ends up in the same general area of the world, and after the flood is over both accounts have the hero offering worship.<sup>34</sup>

However, there are some important differences between the Mesopotamian and Biblical accounts. Noah's ark had a stable shape for flotation. Utnapishtim's was cubicle in shape

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<sup>31</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 180.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 227, 235-236.

<sup>33</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 180.

<sup>34</sup> Heibel, 228, 238-239, 251-253, 250, 255-256.

(200 feet cubed) and was neither seaworthy nor water stable.<sup>35</sup> The rain in the Gilgamesh epic lasts only six days while in the Bible it lasts about 40. Utnapishtim ferried some of his society's craftsmen, cattle and seeds to safety, while Noah saves only his family in addition to the animals and some crops for food. The powers behind the floods are also vastly different. In the Biblical account, God is shown to be omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, righteous and gracious. In the polytheistic stories the divine power looks very much like a group of capricious humans. In the Bible, God ordained the flood because humanity had become so violent that they were in danger in exterminating themselves (Gen. 6:13). In the Babylonian account, the high gods send the flood because humans were being too noisy.<sup>36</sup> In the Mesopotamian stories, one of the high gods plans to destroy all of humanity, but the flood hero escapes only because another god disobeys the high god and warns him.<sup>37</sup> In the Bible, God gives humanity 120 years to repent,<sup>38</sup> having Noah preach while he built the Ark (2 Peter 2:5). In the pagan accounts there is no such warning given. Rather the flood hero is encouraged to deceive the rest of humanity so that they would all die. Once the storm begins, the Mesopotamian gods lose control of the deluge and flee in terror to the upper reaches of heaven lest they be swept away in the flood themselves. In the Bible God is never portrayed in such sacrilegious ways. Once the flood begins the gods also admit that they were harsh and had made a mistake. And then the flood is over in a matter of hours. In the Bible, God has no such regret and the flood lasts a realistic amount of time. There is also a difference in the account of the releasing of the birds. The Babylonian account has Utnapishtim releasing a dove first, then a swallow, and then a raven. The Biblical account has

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<sup>35</sup> Ross, *Navigating*, 181.

<sup>36</sup> Heidel, 237, 226.

<sup>37</sup> Heidel, 228-229.

<sup>38</sup> Rehwinkel, 57.

Noah releasing the raven first, and then a dove on three successive occasions. The biblical order of release makes sense in determining the extent of the flood, while the Babylonian account does not.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, one of these stories sound fabricated.

Nevertheless, because of the similarities, many scholars claim that the Biblical account of the flood was copied from the Babylonian. However, Heidel points out that it is just as likely that the two stories have a common origin.<sup>40</sup> Abraham originally came from Mesopotamia and might have passed the story down to his descendants. Further, God could have given Moses an uncorrupted account of the flood while Moses was with Him atop the mountain where God gave him other revelation. Assuming this is what happened, it is no surprise that the Biblical account is the only scientifically feasible one. Also, it is no surprise that it would have the most similarities with the Babylonian account, since the Babylonian account was the closest, both in time and location, to where the events recorded actually took place.

### **Conclusion**

When we look at what the Bible says, and what it does not say, and what archeology, geology, and anthropology say, and do not say, there is no contradiction between the two sources of information. For the Bible states that there are two different sources of revelation: general and special (Romans 1-2; Psalm 19). If there appears to be a contradiction between the two, then we are either misunderstanding the scientific data, we are misunderstanding the biblical data, or we are misunderstanding both. Correctly interpreting both will strengthen our faith, pave the way to sharing the gospel, and will bring much glory to God. This has been the approach of many wise men throughout the history of the church.

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<sup>39</sup> Heidel, 230-232, 249, 256-257, 254, 252-253.

<sup>40</sup> Heidel, 265-268; Filby, 43.



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